SURPRISE! Communion Meditation
Isaiah 64:1-4, Mark 13:32-37
November 29, 1981

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"Life is truly measured, not by the number of breaths taken, but by the number not taken, the occasions when breath is stopped in amazement." The late Halford Luccock made that observation. (Halford Luccock, A Sprig of Holly, p.15). You can remember them, I'm sure: those times when you were taken by surprise: those glorious occasions when you saw something or experienced something, the novelty of which commanded your attention, and the beauty of which nearly overwhelmed you.

How sad it would be if the capacity for astonishment were knocked out of us. How tragic, if we were so jaded by life that there could be no more surprises. My personal definition of death in the midst of life has always included the person who spends a seaside holiday inside a gambling casino. It now includes people who complain that the Game Show has been displaced by the launch of the space shuttle. How sad when the sense of adventure is gone: when there is nothing new under the sun, when life is so flat that we simply can't see or choose not to see: can't or choose not, to be surprised.

Part of what is happening to us is that on a grand scale we seem to be longing for stability, not surprise. Unlike people in the past who were entranced with the very thought of the unexpected, we've had quite enough of it in our city. We've been told so much about the fantastic, unimaginable realities of the future which are about to burst in upon us, the incredible changes that are about to happen, we find ourselves looking for something - anything - that might be the same for a while. There is a strong impetus in us, I maintain, toward the stable. There is something in us that wants and needs predictable solid foundations. In fact, the more unsettled, unpredictable things are in the world, the stronger that impetus becomes.

Religion seems a likely place to find it. The great appeal of "Old Time Religion" I believe is simply its sameness and predictability. It employs the same hymns, same vocabulary, same theological formulas, and, most important, the same format as it always has. The tremendous appeal of fundamentalism is that in many respects it insulates from surprise. Every day brings startling new discoveries about the origin of the universe and the nature of life. Some of them are unsettling. Fundamentalism protects the individual from the assault of surprise by dismissing anything that threatens stability as Godless humanism.

It is no coincidence that religion is predictable. It is not altogether a bad idea. In the sense that it affirms our roots in the past; in the sense that it says something about the changeless truth of God, predictability in religion isn't a bad idea at all. But, of course, it's usually more than that. Religion seems inevitably to make God predictable. Religion seems always to be moving from our understandable, human need for stability, to the fabrication of eternal truths, cast in concrete, which are viable, applicable, relevant for all times. And the trouble with that is that the God presented in the pages of the Bible, at least, doesn't fit the part.

The God of the Bible may be counted on to be full of surprises. Jesus certainly wasn't what His contemporaries had in mind when they thought about a Messiah. In fact, they were infuriated by the suggestion.

Long before then,however, the pattern is clear. Our celebration of Advent begins in the memory of defeat, exile, disillusionment, despair. Advent begins, as we remember what it was like for God's people when they languished in Babylonian captivity five centuries before Christ. The prophets among them have given us our most magnificent and literate theology. In the Isaiah reading this morning the prophet asks God for deliverance. He does so, essentially, by asking God to act in the way he acted before, when He delivered the people from Egyptian captivity. "Why don't you tear the sky open and come down? The mountains would see you and shake with fear... There was a time when you acted like that..."

That sounds a lot like the expectations we continue to place on religion. We want a God who acts like we think God should act. We want no surprises. When Jesus talked about how God might act in the future, however, it was almost always as a warning to expect the unexpected. The bridegroom doesn't show up on schedule. The masters of the estate may arrive at any time. The trouble with religious people in the First Century was that they had God locked up. They knew what God was about. Edmund Steimle writes that the God of First Century Judaism was neatly packaged in six hundred odd thou-shalts and thou-shalt-nots. Jesus infuriated his contemporaries because He shattered their stable predictable image of God.

The same dynamic is liable to happen anytime we take Him seriously. We have no better claim on eternal truth than they did. We have no right to take the passage we read from Mark and predicate on it an entire scenario for the future including the Second Coming and the End of the World. That's very popular religion, by the way - and runs directly counter to what the text says and what the New Testament reveals about God. You don't know when He will show up. You can't plan and program His coming into life. The people who made a profession of that failed miserably.

Advent remembers the past. But mostly it looks forward and alerts us to God's continuing unpredictability. By preparing us to celebrate an unlikely and most surprising birth two thousand years ago, it intends to alert us, make us watchful for God's continuing and surprising intrusion into life.

Fortunately, the child in most of us is alive and well enough that we retain a bit of longing for surprises. We may wish, intellectually, for stability, but deep within us is the childlike anticipation for the unexpected. Advent addresses that: calls it to the surface, the surprise of the birth and the delicious sense of anticipation of the unexpected on Christmas morning.

That's an important part of Christian faith. Robert Hudnut is a Presbyterian minister who published a journal under the title, Surprised by God. He observed, "I did not become a minister because I had 'found God'. I became a minister in order to find him. And on various occasions over the past few years, I have been surprised by what I found...or, if you want to be orthodox, by what found me. Grace is serendipity." (p.9).

God is not predictable. No one expected that He would act the way He chose to act. No one really expected the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem, of a young peasant girl and modest carpenter. No one expected it and very few recognized it when they saw it. It was truly a surprise.

Scottish poet George MacDonald put it beautifully:

"They were all looking for a King
To slay their foes and lift them high.
Thou cam'st a little baby thing
To make a woman cry."

It is a surprise. To prepare to celebrate is more, however, than an act of remembering an event that was a surprise twenty centuries ago. That becomes nostalgia rather quickly. Advent, rather, moves to the future, watching and waiting for God's gracious activity in the world, our world. Advent reminds us that He continues to come into our life - in human birth, and love and reconciliation. God comes when people work for peace and justice and compassion - when hungry people are fed and cold people sheltered. God comes again when people communicate and forgive and embrace and celebrate their love. He comes - surprisingly, in the commonality of human life: in bread and wine and love shared and joy expressed.

God came among us in the birth we are preparing to celebrate. And He comes now, again and again. Watch, wait - don't miss Him this year.

Amen.

God of love, we are grateful for the season beginning today: for lovely customs which recall the past and for strong hopes which foretell Your Kingdom. Help us, O God, to see Your presence in the world. Give us strength to make common cause with your activity in the world; Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.